

**SPORT IN FOCUS****COLLECTIONS OF THE OLYMPIC MUSEUM AND PHOTO ELYSÉE****28.03 – 17.08.2025****INTRODUCTION**

For over a century, major sporting events have been accompanied by images. With the rise of amateur photography at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, coinciding with the first modern Olympic Games in 1896, photography and sport have, in many respects, evolved together. The visibility given to sporting events necessarily entails the image. In the quest for performance in which effort and gestural skills fuse together, sport is conducted according to precise rules and is paraded as a spectacle when it is carried out with a view to competition. The staging of sport is relayed by the photographers who occupy positions around the stadium. Watched and played everywhere, from the most industrialized to the remotest parts of the globe, sport as a spectacle is coveted both by world of media, economics and politics. Major events attract an ever larger crowd and gain an increasing global audience thanks to the images. The sporting performance, on which the cameras fixate, becomes a demonstration of a social model. Photography has undoubtedly played an essential role in this process, mobilizing a mass audience.

*Sport in Focus* unveils the vast photographic collections of the Olympic Museum and the Photo Elysée museum. During major competitions, photographs are intended to draw attention to the athletes' performances. By exploring a largely unpublished photographic heritage, this exhibition offers us a narrative that sheds light on sports photography and the Olympic Games in particular.

**1. BROADCASTING**

Photography, invented in 1839, has never stopped evolving. It rapidly established itself as a powerful means of communication, with a reproducibility that ensures its use in a wide range of media: posters, newspapers, magazines, books, postcards, stamps, etc. Photography's instantaneousness makes it a privileged medium for covering and broadcasting big events. Images do more than illustrate, they comment, document, question, shock, amuse, charm, and allow spectators to see and experience emotions from a distance. Photography was quickly used to depict events in sports. Some photographers even specialized in it. Thus, the Olympic Museum conserves photography dating back to the creation of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in 1894.

When the Frenchman Pierre de Coubertin launched the project to reestablish the Olympic Games, he wanted them to serve as a model for the youth. The IOC granted the first modern Olympic Games to Greece, cradle of the ancient Olympics. The first Olympic Games in Athens, 1896, brought together 241 athletes in nine disciplines and around forty competitive events. Photographers were hired to publicize the event. The Eastman Kodak company, founded eight years prior, provided photographic equipment and film. It later offered medical imagery services to help athletes. The foundation of the modern Games was thus in place. Organized every four years, with competitions planned in advance, the Games depend on the participation of top athletes, with opening and closing ceremonies marking each edition. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, sport was the center of a vigorous media world, emerging everywhere through the image. For fifty years, television played a key role in the process. Still, almost two centuries after its invention, photography continues to inform the visual narratives of sports. Thanks to digital resources and the Internet, image production and distribution have never been so prolific.

### **Ella Maillart: The Athlete herself Recounts her Sporting Exploits**

Before travelling the world and recounting her experiences in numerous books that are still popular today, Ella Maillart (1903-1997) was a distinguished athlete in a number of disciplines, competing at a high level. In 1919, at the age of 16, she founded the “Champel Hockey Club”, the first women’s hockey club in French-speaking Switzerland. Together with her friend Hermine de Saussure, and accompanied by an all-women crew, she subsequently made several successful Mediterranean crossings by sailing boat. In 1924, she was the only woman and the youngest athlete to helm a one-design boat in the regattas at the Paris Olympic Games. Between 1931 and 1934, she also represented Switzerland at the Alpine Skiing World Championships. By collecting photographs, images in printed paraphernalia and using her own photos in albums, the athlete Ella Maillart tells the story of her sporting adventures.

## 2. TECHNOLOGICAL DEVICES

Photography and sports developed in parallel in search of performance and precision. When first invented, technical constraints permitted neither instantaneousness nor capturing gestures in photography.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Frenchman Étienne-Jules Marey invented “chronophotography” using a photographic gun that took photographs in successive bursts. This technique of observation made the reproduction of body movements possible with astonishing precision. Photography was suddenly able to reveal information inaccessible to the naked eye. Images of bodies in motion, captured in the midst of action, make particularly dynamic compositions. Surprisingly, sports photography allowed for blurring and distortion, where the medium was expected to produce sharp, precise visuals. At the 1948 Olympic Games in London, Omega, which had been supplying time-keeping equipment since 1932, installed a new camera in the stadium, which would become an indispensable tool in competitions. Thanks to this innovative technology, photoelectric cells trigger stopwatches which record the exact moment a finish line is crossed. Using the latest generation of technology, the camera captures 10,000-20,000 images per second. These thousands of images placed end to end create a shot known as photo-finish. Today, many recording devices are used in training to help control and visualize movement to improve performance. As athletes strive to reach new heights, photographic equipment has become more and more efficient, flexible and fast. Nothing escapes the all-powerful eye of the camera. The proliferation of points of view from simultaneous activities by numerous photographers covering events from every possible angle (bird’s eye, low-angle, close-up, underwater cameras...) offer an unprecedented spectacle. With the progress of image-capturing technologies, exploring movement provides unparalleled tools for analysis, changing the way we perceive sports.

### **Supernatural Bodies: Disqualified Performance**

Criticism of doping for damaging the health of athletes, and more generally for damaging public health, obscures the question of excesses related to high-level sports. Excess training, excess psychological pressure, too many competitions, overworking the body in the name of sports and financial interests all affect health in its most basic sense. The radiant image of the victorious athlete leads to misconceptions of the champion as the embodiment of health, and that doping, as such, is the only ingredient likely to destroy that health. Although the IOC has had an anti-doping policy in place since 1968, the mental health of the athlete has only recently received attention within the sporting world. Motivated by the perpetual need to improve performance and the pursuit of a record, doping is more common in sports for which strength and power are key.

At the 1988 Seoul Olympics, Ben Johnson beat the world record at the 100-meters final, finishing in 9.79 seconds, ahead of Carl Lewis. Convicted for doping with anabolic steroids, he was quickly stripped of the title and sent back from South Korea. The Canadian sprinter's body was thus removed from the photo finish, and the pantheon of sports. Suspicions of doping lingered for years to come, as did the shadow of Ben Johnson, which can be seen in the photo finish with Carl Lewis in first place.

### 3. SPECTACLE

Thanks to the media, the success of sports became closely linked to the spectacle. At the center are athletes in action, heroes and heroines, and around the sports grounds an audience of fans and the curious come to watch the events. Major sporting events are accompanied by widespread visual marketing. This is the case for the Olympics, as well as the Tour de France, founded in 1903, and for certain football matches. To captivate the public, the tools of advertising continually evolved with press agencies recruiting more photographers and cameramen, equipment was improved upon, and competitions became international.

In 1924, The Olympic Games were held in Paris with over 3,000 athletes—135 of which were women—hailing from 44 countries. In 2024, almost 10,500 athletes from the territories of all 206 National Olympic Committees and the IOC Refugee Olympic Team participate in the Olympics—with, for the first time, a perfect gender equality. The spectacle of sports involves athletes performing to a mass of anonymous faces, groups on roadsides or in stadiums, experiencing emotions ranging from joy to tears, astonishment to exaltation. Most photographers try to capture exciting, tension-filled moments in sports, such as starts, finishes and crashes. Some focus on athletic figures in action, others turn the lens towards the audience, observing the crowd as a homogeneous entity. The images are designed to attract attention: focusing on emotions expressed during competitions, they seek to arouse passions in spectators who are not present at the scene.

Spectator sports need images to attract large audiences. While photographers provide their work to the media, sports organizations create visual archives for largescale marketing campaigns.

#### **Indigenous Sports: Disqualified Alterity**

Subject to European sociopolitical domination, indigenous populations gradually gained access to sports codified by colonial powers. First reserved for Europeans seeking to develop their inner circles or local elites like Indian princes, sports took hold among colonized populations through the combined actions of Christian missionaries, educators and servicemen from colonial administrations. But its success wasn't simply a matter of imposing social norms and codes on native populations. Sport practices were reinvented, reappropriated and transformed through contact with colonized populations.

Sport was also a means of challenging imperialism. International sports events gave certain imperial subjects unparalleled visibility, especially during opening ceremonies during which stigmas were turned on their heads to attract and shift the focus, as was the case with the British Indian contingent that participated in the 1936 Berlin Olympics. Subversive effects are even more pronounced when events are the scene of power reversals, as with Abebe Bikila, for example, the Abyssinian runner, who triumphed barefoot in Rome in 1960, from which Fascist troops had set out to conquer Ethiopia.

#### 4. VISUAL GRAMMAR

The model of the athlete, with a chiseled body reminiscent of the beauty of antique statues, is deeply entrenched in sports photography. While the first photographs captured sportsmen posing proudly before the camera, an aesthetics of action and speed was established with the development of new technologies. Representing the alliance of muscles and mind in the image of Pierre de Coubertin, photographers had to express the Apollonian ideal of the athletic body. The image conveyed is a sleek, agile physique, sculpted by exercise.

On the playing field, documentary photographers and reporters were gradually joined by art photographers seeking to go beyond simply recording an event. Analyzing movement, the nuances of gesture and dissecting the body visually were all ways for these photographers to renew perspectives and create surprise. Formal innovations in sports photography developed in the interwar period with aesthetics at its forefront. Thus, visual communication focused on athletes in action, gesture and the shape of the body in close-up. Numerous images display athletes in mid-air or capture the physicality of bodies with contracted muscles. On top of capturing victorious moments, sports photography focused on faces during and after exertion, making it palpable. The emotions of athletes, recorded up close, captured the attention of viewers. While images provide information, they also condition the ways in which the sporting events they depict are read. Thus, a visual grammar characterizes sports photography with a clear goal: one of venerating the power and speed of athletes in the very instant of their achievement, and building an imaginary in which they are associated with gods and goddesses.

##### **Black Fists**

Mexico City, 1968: a few weeks after the army's intervention at the Plaza de las Tres Culturas, and several months after the assassination of Martin Luther King, the stadium served as a political forum. A couple of days after Tommie Smith and John Carlos protested at the podium of the 200-meter race leading to their expulsion from the Games, Lee Evans (photo by Raymond Depardon), winner of the 400-meter race, raised his fist in anger.

After him, Bob Beamon and other Black American athletes repeated the gesture as a reminder of ongoing racial segregation. Although they surprised audiences, sports authorities, and the media, these acts were not spontaneous. As members of United Black Students for Action, Evans and Smith participated in founding the Olympic Project for Human Rights, in October 1967, in which plans were drawn for a Black boycott of the Olympic Games, with the aim of pushing for progress on the issue of race. The athletes were nonetheless torn between their political goals and the ultimate achievement in sports that the Olympic Games represent. In addition to sporadic protests by athletes, which varied in force and effect, the protest movement spread; capturing the gesture through photography reinforced its impact.

### **Female athletes: Disqualified Gender**

The presumed physical fragility and social roles of wife and mother served as justification for the exclusion of women from many sports for decades. Sports was a fortress for the male gender, well-guarded by medical, educational and sports authorities. In some sports, women participated in show competitions with no awarded medals nor quantified performances, so as not to affect gender hierarchies. After appearing at the 1900 Olympic Games in high-society sports (tennis, golf), their inclusion in flagship Olympic events took much time (1912 for swimming, 1928 for athletics). Despite their number gradually increasing over the course of many Olympiads, women remained outnumbered until Paris 2024 Olympic Games. This inequality is still the focus of attention today, suggesting that these gains remain unstable. This is illustrated by the existence of certain ICO guidelines laid out in 2021 that make strong recommendations to those producing text or images related to the Olympic Movement “not to focus on physical appearance”; “avoid reinforcing feminine and masculine stereotypes”; “avoid passive and sexy images” (IOC-Gender-portrayal-guidelines).

## 5. PHOTOGRAPHERS

Photographers set up in stadiums from the very first Olympic Games. Seated in the front row, they captured decisive moments in competitions and contributed to sports narrative. The proliferation of cameras on sports grounds supplied photos to databases and press agencies which archived millions of images in sports. The Olympic Museum holds over 900,000 photographs, the first of which date to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Since the Olympic Games in Paris in 1924, a photography service managed by the French Olympic Committee was founded to produce official images. Photographers hired by this service documented various events and all the exploits of sports. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, sports became increasingly popular, and the sports press flourished. For over a century, all major sports events have been documented by professional photographers employed by press agencies or sports organizations. Sports photography, however, is not just the work of photographers specialized in the field. Great figures in photography have produced sports images, from Alexander Rodchenko, Annie Leibovitz and Helen Levitt to René Burri and Raymond Depardon. Photo Elysée, which is not a museum specialized in sports photography, holds thousands of images of sporting events across the globe. Styles of photography vary. Some seek to capture the body in movement to create dynamic images, others show that observing sports makes it possible to document historical and sociological phenomena. From the stadium to the streets, from anonymous crowds participating in a mass spectacle to athletes captured in action, from physical pursuits by amateurs to performance by sports professionals, sports photography testifies to the growing role of sports in different cultures. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, image production is continually increasing. Professional photographers, amateurs, and athletes themselves contribute to this production and distribution, especially through social networks, in the digital age. Almost two centuries after its invention, photography continues to shape the visual narrative of sports.

### **Lothar Rübelt and Leni Riefenstahl: Disqualified Images**

Granted by the IOC to the Weimar Republic in 1931, the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games were organized three years after Hitler rose to power. He sought to boost international opinion by presenting an image of a welcoming Germany, one that was open to the rest of the world. Hired by the regime, Lothar Rübelt and Leni Riefenstahl's vision of the body was inseparable from the political and aesthetic ideals of the Nazis. Technological progress in the 1930s led to images based on a new aesthetics emphasizing movement and the beauty of gestures by athletes with bodies sculpted by physical effort, prepared for competition in the Olympics. In Berlin, athletic feats were captured midair, at low angles, with only the sky as backdrop, suggesting bodies freed from gravity. The succession of shots of jumps and dives is reminiscent of representations of corporal performances by heroic bodies gradually taking hold in mass culture. The polemical underpinnings of Rübelt and Riefenstahl's work resides in the continuity between political and

aesthetic ideals, with visual art at the heart of the regime's propaganda. By selecting and ranking bodies through competition, these artists' work served the corporal grammar of their patron's idealized aesthetics.